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ABSTRACT

To address some of the social, health, economic and cultural issues of growing older in America, Greenfield Community College (GCC) in Massachusetts sponsored a Celebration of Growing Older program. The 2-month long series of events was designed to educate the public, both young and old, about the myths of aging and to challenge some assumptions about old people. Bringing together municipal groups, arts councils, senior centers, health organizations, and corporations, the college provided a full-blown program that was both educational and entertaining. Events included workshops for elementary school teachers on integrating aging issues into the curriculum; a slide-tape presentation by the Grey Panthers on stereotypes of the elderly; film festivals; and arts and crafts exhibits featuring the works of elderly artists. GCC's experience with the Celebration program served as the basis for the following suggestions for other institutions interested in implementing similar programs: (1) work closely with community groups; (2) begin the search for funding as early in the planning stages as possible; (3) anchor smaller events and exhibits to more highly visible events to enhance media coverage; (4) build programs on existing audiences; (5) try to get faculty to attach a class to every event; (6) contact media as far in advance as possible; and (7) centralize scheduling of events. (EJV)

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CELEBRATION OF GROWING OLDER:

A Community-Wide Program on Elder Issues

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CELEBRATION OF GROWING OLDER: A COMMUNITY-WIDE PROGRAM ON ELDER ISSUES

By B.J. Roche

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Greenfield, Massachusetts

Old age. We fear it, we joke about it, and most of us do anything we can to avoid it, except, of course, choose the alternative. Growing old is not a topic our society is comfortable with, despite gains in medicine and changes in lifestyles that have increased the average life expectancy of Americans from 47 years in 1900 to 74 years today.

Experts say that within the lifetime of people now living, our present elderly population will double until one out of four Americans will be over the age of 60. This increase in the elderly population will necessitate profound changes in medical care, housing, retirement and careers, tax structures and allocation of resources in the United States.

To address some of the social, health, economic and cultural issues of growing older in America, Greenfield Community College sponsored The Celebration of Growing Older last fall. The two-month long series of events was designed to educate the public about the myths of aging and to challenge some well-worn assumptions about old people. By bringing together municipal groups, arts councils, senior centers, health organizations and corporations, the college provided a full-blown program that was both educational and entertaining in scope.

The topic was a natural for the college, because of the demographic and geographic make-up of its service area. Franklin County, located in northwestern Massachusetts on the Vermont border, has a higher proportion of elderly in its population than any county in the state. While the statewide average is 14-15 percent, in Franklin County, one out of every five persons is over age 65. Franklin County is also financially one of the state's poorest, a largely rural area, whose former glory as a manufacturing region has been diminished. Senior centers in the outlying hilltowns are supported by state grants and through annual town meetings, and they operate on tight budgets.

The title "Celebration" was chosen after much discussion among coordinating committee members. Most people don't celebrate getting older, but the coordinating committee chose the word to emphasize America's concern with staying young and the rest of the world's respect for the aging. The committee wanted to urge young and old to take a positive approach to aging without sentimentalizing or glorifying the subject.

G.C.C.'s goal was to educate both the young and old about the issues of aging, and to provide medical and cultural programs to the twelve local senior centers. The result was a potpourri of events, including Franklin County's first appearance of U.S. Representative Barney Frank and his 73-year-old mother Elsie, who is an elder activist; workshops for elementary school teachers on integrating aging issues into their curriculum; a slide-tape presentation by the Grey Panthers of Greater Boston on stereotypes of the elderly in the media; an appearance of Mark Twain impersonator William McLinn; film festivals, quilting and needlepoint exhibits, photography and craft shows featuring the works of elder artists.

Those who did not attend these events read about them in the local newspapers. For two months, Franklin County residents read feature stories about elders of interest in The Greenfield Recorder, the county's daily newspaper. They found sheets of paper refuting myths about aging in their shopping bags at grocery stores. They heard public service announcements about osteoporosis and elder health topics on the radio. They saw interviews with elder people and elder activists on cable television and newscasts.

A look at how G.C.C. approached the planning of the Celebration may serve as an example to other schools for whom elder issues are a concern. Planners emphasize the need to work closely with the community groups, and to begin the search for funding as early in the planning stages as feasible. And because aging is not a popular topic, do not automatically assume you have an audience for every event.

"I can't stress enough the vital role of community members in this program," said coordinator Louise Minks. "In addition to our regular committee members we had community members from the medical field, councils on aging, senior centers, arts councils and other interested persons to provide their input."

Minks' approach was to plan three or four highly visible "splashy" events throughout the two months and anchor them with several ongoing smaller events and exhibits. Media coverage of the larger events led to more interest in the other, less visible events.

Minks and Robert Merriam, assistant to the president at G.C.C., began planning for the Celebration in May, 1984. The kickoff was set for September, 1985, at the Franklin County Fair, an event which traditionally draws thousands of county residents. In May, Minks sent 500 letters to organizations involved in elder issues in the region. She used any vehicle she could find, including local newspapers, church newsletters, small town newsletters and civic group meetings to ask for ideas for exhibits and lectures.

The response, Minks said, was "very enthusiastic." Franklin County Home Care Corporation, which provides county-wide services to the elderly co-sponsored the Franks' appearance, and several local artists, photographers, writers and craftspeople offered their services. Wilson's, Greenfield's largest department store, offered its Main St. window to publicize events, and arranged for three different exhibits of elder artists to be shown in the store. Libraries in even the most far-flung towns offered to prominently display their literature related to aging.

Within the college itself, many groups volunteered resources or time to help with the Celebration. The Student Activities Office sponsored a weekly film festival with senior citizens as its focus, and work study students from that office helped with publicity and posters. Theater professor Jim Godwin and his wife Missy took their performance of "The Gin Game" on the road to senior centers in the area.

G.C.C.'s television technician Gary Longe taped the events for cable television using the college's television studio, and art department professor Pamela Sacher arranged for an exhibition of photographs of Elder Bostonians of Achievement to be scheduled at the college.

"We were delighted with the response of the college community," said Merriam. "Most divisions provided support from their limited funds, each division sent a faculty member to provide ideas for the Celebration, and more than 30 staff and faculty members became patrons and some faculty devoted time within their academic schedule to address aging issues as related to their field. The Continuing Education Division developed some courses and workshops dealing with elder issues, and during the summer one of the faculty sought expressions about the aging from her students."

Merriam added that publicity about the program focussed public attention on the college and its mission in serving the community.

If the community response was overwhelming, finding the money to pay for the program was another story, according to Cameron Beavers, director of institutional research at the college and grant writer seeking funding for the program.

"I get the strong impression that foundations as yet are not funding programs for the aged as much as they are for youth, indigent and handicapped," he said. "And I guess that's a reflection of society as a whole. Here we have a problem now under scrutiny, but the right wheels haven't been moved in relation to funding."

Seed money for the program came from the Greenfield Community College Foundation, a group made up of local businesses and prominent citizens in the community. The foundation made a $2500 grant, which was matched by the college. Community members made in-kind donations of services and materials, and additional revenue came from ad sales in the Celebration's printed program.

Beavers advises groups to start the grant application process as soon as planning for the program begins, because grant applications can take up to six months to be processed and approved. In addition to applying to various state offices, Beavers applied to corporations for help.

Beavers prepared and sent out thirteen proposals requesting from $3,000 to $10,000 to help defray costs. Ten of the thirteen proposals were sent to in-state foundations, and two were in the Northeast.

But the responses were not encouraging.

The Celebration of Growing Older was breaking new ground, Beavers said, and that became part of the problem in finding funds for the program. Because of the broad scope of the program, some foundations faulted the proposals for not having enough of one kind of element, humanistic or cultural, for example. One foundation commented that the program would "sentimentalize old people."

"Foundations are accustomed to a package with straight evaluations," Beavers said. "I think the uniqueness of the Celebration of Growing Older might have appeared too diverse, too complex. And because it's not a program that you can see in a neat package, the project was probably misunderstood."

"The impact and importance of this project is harder to grasp because it's on so many different levels," he added, "But my own feeling is that once the word gets out as to the program's success, that other institutions will be replicating it."

The total budget for the program came to $13,964. Of that total, $1,700 was allocated for the part-time project coordinator's salary. Other major expenditures included $2,000 for William McLinn's appearance, including an evening performance and two classroom appearances at the college, posters and printing, film rentals, transportation and office supplies. Two secretaries in the office of the president took on additional duties in scheduling film and program loans to senior centers.

Only $500 was allocated for advertising for the events, so Minks had to rely heavily on radio and print publicity. Editors at the local newspapers were contacted about the program, and a full list of events went out to the media in late August. As each event approached, press releases and photos were sent to the papers, and editors were called to do feature stories announcing the events beforehand, and covering them afterwards.

Press coverage was generally good, and helped make up for the progarms lack of advertising money. The local media recognized that aging was an issue of some public concern, and gave much space to the issues the college was raising. The Greenfield Recorder published an editorial endorsing the program. In addition to covering Celebration events, the paper ran a series of articles on different elderly people in the county. The Springfield Union covered nearly every event scheduled, and gave the stories prominent positions on its Franklin County page.

Did the program change people's attitudes about growing older?

"I think it's hard to measure public consciousness in some things," said Albert Norman, director of Franklin County Home Care Corporation. "But in elder issues you can assume that there is no consciousness. The Celebration helped increase the awareness that aging issues are community issues. The whole point was to make the public realize that everyone ages and that these are everyone's issues."

Said Minks: "I think that many people's responses were, 'well, that's nice, but I'm not old.' But what we have planted is a little time bomb. In a lot of very subtle, subconscious ways, the time bomb will explode eventually. We were struggling a'nst a tide of apathy on this subject, and maybe the only success we had was to plant the seeds of urgency for people."

Norman said the structure of the program could easily be duplicated by in other institutions.

"The Celebration did serve as a very viable way to present aging issues in a larger context, and I hope other communities will follow," he said. "We've also set up a resource network between Greenfield Community College and a dozen senior centers, and it would be very exciting to continue that relationship. The ground has only been broken."

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SIDEBAR 1. MONDAY MORNING QUARTERBACKING—OR, IF WE HAD IT TO DO OVER...

A program as broad and varied as the Celebration is bound to have a few snags. If we had it to do over, here's what we would do differently.

* Build your programs on existing audiences. Programs at senior centers were universally successful, Minks said, because they had built-in audiences. Programs where the college had to develop audiences were not as well attended as they might have been. "You have to face the gut reality that people are already too busy," she said, "And since they are already too busy, you have to buy into the schedule they already have. To do that, you have to have a program in place earlier, so you can get on the agenda at Chamber of Commerce meetings, women's clubs, anyplace where there is a built-in audience." In a situation where there is not much money for publicity, this becomes even more important.

* Try to get faculty to attach a class to every event, and guarantee that you have a faculty member behind the project. "I think we had a lot of support and encouragement from faculty members, but most of them didn't attend a single event," Minks said. For example, a slide presentation by the Gray Panthers on the stereotypes of the aging in the media was poorly attended, and could have served to illuminate issues in sociology, journalism, health, or media classes. A better college turnout at the event would have shown college support and aided students in their understanding of aging issues.

* Make contact with the media as far in advance as possible. Elderly people are also consumers, and your local newspaper may be interested in building an advertising supplement around the stories and releases about your program. Such supplements are planned well in advance, so the sooner you discuss the idea with your local newspaper editors, the better. It's also worth making personal contact with your local editors or publishers to make them aware of the importance of your program in the community.

* If you are loaning programs to senior centers or groups, "it's absolutely essential that there be a full time secretary who is there on a daily basis, and that all scheduling of events be done by one person," said Louise Minks. This is particularly important when the coordinator is working part-time, and is not always there to answer his or her phone.

* More money would have helped, said Minks, "Because it would have bought us more time. Without money, you can't create a program."

SIDEBAR 2. FOUNDATIONS IN MASSACHUSETTS THAT FUND ELDERLY PROGRAMS

Harry Doehla Foundation, Inc.

Henry Lusardi, president

c/o Singer and Lusardi

370 Main St.

Worcester, MA 01608

Sarah Gillett Services for the Elderly, Inc.

c/o Main Hurdman

1500 Main St.

Springfield, MA 01115

The Nulman Foundation

Saul Nulman, Trustee

P.O. Box 888

Cheshire, CT 06140

The Frederick E. Weber Charities Corporation

G. Storer Baldwin, Treasurer

50 Congress ST.

Boston, MA 02109

SIDEBAR 3. THE CELEBRATION OF GROWING OLDER PROGRAM

EVENTS

September 6, 1985--Senior Day, Franklin County Fair. Voter registration for senior citizens at Greenfield Community College fair booth; pamphlets on elder health, finance and lifestyle topics available. Nurses Educational Collaborative health assessment program.

Sept. 18--Teacher Seminar: "Why Teach the Young About the Old?" featuring Fran Pratt, director of the Center on Aging, Acton, Mass.

Sept. 18--Lecture: "Long Life Vs. the Cult of Youth," by Fran Pratt.

Sept. 22--Greenfield Community College Fun and Fitness Course grand opening, with invitations sent out to senior centers.

Sept. 23--Slide presentation: "Gray Panthers' Media Watch."

Sept. 26--Trip to Renoir exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Mass.

Sept. 28--Lecture: U.S. Representative Barney Frank and Mrs. Elsie Frank speak on elder issues at the Greenfield Senior Center. Elder voter registration held the same day.

Oct. 7--Breakfast lecture: Wendell Coltin, columnist on elder issues.

Oct. 17--Performance: William McLinn, appearing as "Mark Twain Himself."

ART EXHIBITS

"A Patterned Spirit," an exhibit of oil paintings by local elder artist Ruth Adams.

"Works by Older Exhibitors," an exhibit of sculpture, pottery and crafts by older exhibitors at the Leverett (Mass.) Artists and Craftsmen Center.

"Focus on Area Elders," a photo exhibit by Norell Gagnon at Greenfield Community College library.

"Expressions of Older Artisans," a multi-media exhibit at the Salmon Falls Artists Showroom in Shelburne Falls, Mass.

"Quilts and Coverlets," An exhibit by Kathryn Heath, at Wilson's Department Store, Greenfield.

"Stitched Portraits of Elders," by Deidre Scherer, fiber artist from Williamsville, Vermont, at Greenfield and Northfield senior centers.

"Works by Senior Members," sponsored by the Deerfield Valley Art Association at Wilson's Department Store, Greenfield.

"Needleworkers Guild Exhibit," by senior members, at the Greenfield Public Library.

"Boston's Elder Men and Women of Achievement," by elder photographer Jamie Cope, at Greenfield Community College.

FILM SERIES

"Root Hog or Die," "The Shameless Old Lady," "Ruth Stout's Garden," "Arthur and Lillie," "The Antique Collector," "The Shopping Bag Lady," "Maud Morgan, Older Artist," all films with elderly people as main characters, were shown on Tuesdays in September, sponsored by the G.C.C. Student Activities Office. The Franklin Medical Center also sponsored its own one-day film festival, which was broadcast on closed-circuit television to patients.

COURSES AND WORKSHOPS

Osteoporosis Workshop, held at Senior Center in Greenfield each Tuesday in September.

"Strategies for Senior Investors," "Aging, Myths and Realities," "Invest for Your Future," "Health Assessment of the Elderly, a Holistic Approach," "Human Growth and Development," "Life After Forty: A Positive Approach to Menopause," credit and non-credit courses offered by the Division of Continuing Education. "Spirituality, a Neglected Aspect of Health and Aging," "How to Design Your Own Wellness Program," health workshops held at the Greenfield Senior Center. "How Safe Are You?" a workshop on safety and protection, sponsored by Upjohn Health Care Services at the Greenfield Senior Center.

OTHER

"Myths of Aging," short, question and answer sheets rebutting popular myths about Social Security, the aging process, and the status of the elderly were distributed in shopping bags at several local supermarkets.

"Getting Older, Getting Better," interviews with local Franklin County elders on area radio stations.

"The Silver Screen," a series of half-hour documentaries on local elders broadcast over cable television.

PROGRAMS MADE AVAILABLE TO SENIOR CENTERS

Janina Davenport, a local senior musician played "older-new" music for sing-alongs.

A slide-tape show on Elderhosteling with commentary by an experienced Elderhostel participant.

Film: "Root Hog or Die," an award-winning, locally-filmed documentary which focusses on older people and their experiences growing up and living in the country.

Women and Aging in Literature, a presentation by professor Virginia Low, a former teacher of women's studies at G.C.C.

Death, the Final Stage of Growth, a presentation by G.C.C. professor Eleanor Goodman on how death can become a positive experience and not to be feared.

"The Gin Game," a cutting from the Broadway play presented by theater professor James Godwin and his wife Missy.

Medical issues: members of G.C.C. staff and community agencies were available to discuss nutrition, safety, osteoporosis, Alzheimer's Disease, cardiovascular awareness.

Energy conservation and home security, two workshops presented by Northeast Utilities of Northfield, Mass.

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